

Archæological Newsletter

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A Horse's Tail Tale or Not?

Mima Kapches, Senior Curator, Department of World Cultures

The Find

In November of 1976 when Walter Kenyon was directing the excavation of the Neutral Iroquoian Grimsby cemetery site, Grimsby, Ontario, pieces of a tightly plaited cord were recovered from Grave 11 (**Figure 1**). Unfortunately, their exact provenience in relation to the burials in the grave is not known because of looting which took place the night of November 25th. The pieces were picked up from the disturbed earth the next day. Kenyon described these as "three pieces of four-strand plaited horsehair" (1982, 75). This horsehair identification intrigued me because the horse is not native to Ontario; the species was introduced into the Americas by Europeans. Since the Grimsby site dates to about AD 1600-1650 (Lennox and Fitzgerald, 1990, 410) this would be the earliest artifact made from horse in Ontario. This identification begs the question when did horses arrive in Ontario? And using modern scientific analyses is it possible to confirm that the cord is made of horsehair?



Figure 1: Two fragments of the cord (ROM 76.360.396).

When did Horses arrive in Ontario?

There has been some research on the introduction and spread of the horse in North America (Cowdrey and Martin, 2005). As early as the beginning of the sixteenth century there were horses on the Caribbean islands of Cuba, Hispaniola and Jamaica as well as the mainland of Central America. Spanish horses spread north into the American mountains and plains. On the east coast, the Spanish in Florida had horses in the middle of the sixteenth century. And in the mid-

Atlantic, in the British settlements of Jamestown (AD 1607) and Plymouth (AD 1624) there were horses, but the likelihood of these horses or parts of them, reaching Ontario is limited.

In New York State there were horses fairly early in settlements around the Hudson River. By 1624, Dutch Fort Orange was established on the site where presently stands the state capital, Albany. This fort was a fur trading post but also a farming centre. These farmers were Walloons, French speaking Protestants fleeing from religious persecution in what was then the Spanish Netherlands, roughly equivalent to modern Belgium. In 1643 Jesuit Father Jogues reported "when any one comes for the first time to dwell in the country, they furnish him horses, cows, etc., and give him provisions" (JR 21, 107). But these horses were for the Dutch and unless traded or taken during aggressions Natives had no access to them. Forty years later, in 1684, Baron Lahontan on a visit to Seneca Iroquois villages in western New York commented that "in these villages (we) found plenty of horses, black cattel, [sic] fowl and hogs" (1703, 77-78). Over sixty years later, in 1745, the well-known American botanist, John Bartram noted on a visit to an Onondaga Iroquois village "all... came to gaze at us and our horses" (1751, 40). There's a slim possibility that the Grimsby horsehair is from New York and either Dutch or English horses. But, the horses in these historic references are all later than the Grimsby date and also horses were uncommon in New York among the Iroquois until the middle of the eighteenth century.

Turning to Ontario, when did horses arrive? The first Europeans in what is now Ontario, arrived in AD 1615. They were French explorers and missionaries based in Quebec. But horses did not arrive in Quebec until many years later. In 1639, the Jesuit Father LeJeune wrote "this year some asses have been brought over (to Quebec), which will be of great service; horses could be used, but there is no hurry about bringing them" (JR 9,

161). The problem with using horses at that time was the lack of roads in the wilderness, although that's not really a deterrent for horse travel, and the general difficulty of travel using horse drawn vehicles. Furthermore, to travel to the interior there were large expanses of water to traverse and canoes were ill-equipped to transport such large animals.



Figure 2: In Krieghoff's "Sleigh and Three Habitants" the shaggy and powerful Canadian horse races across a snowy track. (ROM 951.60.4)

The first record of a horse arriving in Quebec is in 1647 (JR 30, 181), "That same vessel brought the 1st Horse, of which the habitants [sic] made a present to Monsieur the governor." This was a single horse, not intended for breeding. It wasn't until eighteen years later, in 1665, that horses began to arrive from France in sufficient numbers to begin a breeding program (JR 50, 79). The Natives, "who had never seen any, viewed them with admiration, and were astonished that the Moose of France (for so they styled them) were so tractable and so obedient to man's every wish" (JR 50, 79). Other domesticated animals did make their way into Ontario for at Ste. Marie, the mission founded by the Jesuits near Midland, Ontario, there were chickens, pigs and cattle by 1650 when the mission was abandoned (JR 35, 25). By 1666-1667 the Jesuits reported that in

Quebec “(domesticated) animals are becoming abundant here, especially horses, which are beginning to spread throughout the entire country” (JR 51,173).

In May of 1684 Lahontan on a visit to Quebec observed horses “who are so insensible of the cold, that I have seen fifty or sixty of 'em in January and February stand in the snow up to the breast, in the midst of a wood, without offering to go near their owner's house” (1703, Vol. 1, 14-15). These French horses, sent by Louis XIV, were small, hardy breeds from Brittany and Normandy and were the ancestors of the Canadian (also known as Canadien) breed. The well known painter of nineteenth century Canada, Cornelius Krieghoff, often painted these horses described as the “most serviceable hardy animals [which] shuffle over the ground at an astonishingly quick pace;...[and are] out in all weathers, and [are] inured to hardships and rough usage from the day [they are] foaled” (Figure 2) (Harper 1979, 38-39).

The artifact from Grimsby is dated to the middle of the seventeenth century and if it is indeed horsehair it's unlikely that it came from Quebec. By the mid-eighteenth century the Canadian breed of horses could have been brought to Ontario by French traders and settlers. Then during the British era at the end of the eighteenth century horses were transported by large boats on Lake Ontario. By the nineteenth century horse remains are found on trading posts and military establishments in limited frequencies (Cooper and Savage 1994).

Interestingly there is an image of a horse and its rider in the pictographs at Agawa Bay on the shore of Lake Superior (Dewdney and Kidd, 1967, 82). Knowing the date of the arrival of horse in eastern Canada this was likely painted after the middle of the seventeenth century (Figure 3).

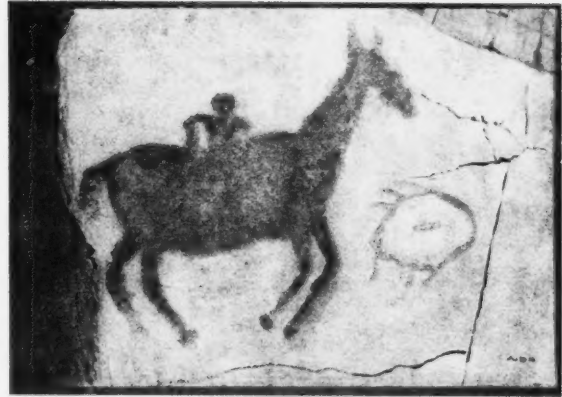


Figure 3: Horse and rider pictographs at Agawa Bay on the shore of Lake Superior.

What is the Cord Made of?

The cord is a dark colour, almost blackened. All three pieces are from the same piece of cord about 6 mm in diameter and when placed together about 34 cm in combined length. In the Grimsby publication and in the site notes at the ROM there's no mention of who identified the cord as horsehair. So I wondered if indeed it was horse and if it might be possible confirm that identification using DNA analysis. I asked Dr. Alan Baker and his DNA sequencing technician Oliver Haddrath, in the ROM's Department of Natural History, if they could tell me what the cord was made of. It was not possible to extract DNA from the cord. So Haddrath took the cord to the Ontario Centre for Forensic Sciences where Johanne Almer identified the cord as being from an animal in the Family Cervidae, most likely deer. (Haddrath to Kapches, e-mail 22 February 2007). So, it is likely thin strips of deer hide plaited to make the cord, not hair at all. Clearly the issue of an artifact dating from the mid-seventeenth century made of horse in Ontario is now moot.

A Horse's Tail Tale or Not, Not!

Oftentimes when one begins a research project one really doesn't know where it will end up. This horse's tail tale is a perfect example. Even though the cord is not made of horsehair it's important to know that fact. Research proceeds in small steps and this small step is an important clarification of the literature.

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Editor: Dr. Chen Shen

Assistant Editor: Christine Caroppo

e-mail queries: anl@rom.on.ca

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